



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

**THE MYTH OF UNION IRRELEVANCE: WHY
WORKER REPRESENTATION STILL
MATTERS IN THE AGE OF AI**

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APRIL 2026

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The Myth of Union Irrelevance: Why Worker Representation Still Matters in the Age of AI

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Over the past 18 years as a labour practitioner, I have heard a familiar refrain: that trade unions are becoming irrelevant and must pivot away from collective bargaining and worker protection toward areas like training, skills development, and now artificial intelligence. At first glance, this may appear forward-looking and in alignment with the current topic of the date. In reality, it reflects a shallow reading and understanding of labour dynamics and a troubling disregard for the lived realities of workers in a system that does not always facilitate social justice.

The premise presented in online comments and other sources is fundamentally flawed because it ignores a simple truth: workers' most immediate concerns have not disappeared. Wages, job security, safe working conditions, and fair treatment remain unresolved for millions. A minimum wage is not a living wage even with incremental adjustments under legislation to give the appearance of support for the vulnerable. To suggest that unions should deprioritize these core issues in favor of future-oriented skills training is to misunderstand both the purpose of unions and the hierarchy of worker needs. A worker struggling to meet basic living expenses is not primarily concerned with AI integration they are concerned with survival, dignity, and fairness.

It is also historically inaccurate to imply that existing workplace protections are somehow self-generating or benevolently granted. The rights and benefits many workers take for granted today, such as minimum wages, overtime pay, occupational safety standards, maternity leave, pensions were not handed down through the goodwill of employers. They were fought for, often at great cost, through sustained advocacy, organizing, and negotiation led by trade unions. To detach unions from this legacy is to erase the very struggles that shaped modern labour standards.

The role of unions within the tripartite system further underscores their continued relevance. Governments, often perceived as neutral arbiters, are themselves major employers. This dual role can create tensions and contradictions, particularly when fiscal priorities conflict with worker welfare. It is not uncommon for governments to advocate restraint in wages or public sector benefits while simultaneously expecting high levels of service delivery. In such contexts, Unions serve as a necessary counterbalance, ensuring that workers' voices are not diminished within policymaking and employment relations. Moreso, in an ever-increasing world of work that calls for more productivity and performance by Workers, the Unions are the watchdogs to ensure that employees rights are not violated nor are they exploited.

There is also a tendency in some commentary to treat labour issues as abstract or theoretical, divorced from real consequences. Consider the worker who is terminated without due process or adequate compensation. In that moment, the question of union relevance becomes starkly practical. Representation, legal support, and collective strength are not optional, but essential. Without them, individual workers are often left vulnerable in systems that are structurally unequal.

The experiences of frontline workers, particularly in recent years, further expose the weakness of the "union irrelevance" argument. Nurses, healthcare workers, and other essential personnel have consistently highlighted issues such as understaffing, burnout, inadequate compensation, and unsafe working conditions. These are not problems that can be solved by AI training modules or future-oriented workshops. They require immediate and sustained intervention, negotiation, and structural change precisely the areas where unions operate. This is not to suggest that unions should ignore technological change. On the contrary, they must engage with it strategically. Training, reskilling,

and digital literacy are important components of modern labour representation. However, these should complement, not replace, the core mandate of protecting workers' rights and advancing their economic interests. A union that focuses solely on future skills while neglecting present injustices risks becoming disconnected from its membership.

There is also a broader intellectual issue at play. Sweeping claims about the obsolescence of unions often rely on generalized assumptions and an overreliance on predictive models or large language systems that prioritize patterns over context. These approaches can flatten complex social realities into simplistic narratives. Labour relations are not purely technical problems; they are deeply human, shaped by power, history, and lived experience. Any analysis that fails to account for this will inevitably fall short.

Ultimately, the argument that unions should abandon their foundational roles in favor of a narrow focus on training and AI reflects a misunderstanding of both the present and the future of work. Technological advancement does not eliminate the need for fairness. As workplaces evolve, so too must the mechanisms that protect workers. Unions are not relics of the past; they are essential institutions for navigating the complexities of modern labour markets.

The real question is not whether unions are relevant, but whether we are willing to recognize the conditions that make them necessary. Until workers no longer face exploitation, insecurity, and inequality, the answer remains clear: unions are not just relevant they are indispensable.